



Leave Perfection Behind

BY NIKKI PATERICK

“When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

—Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*¹

According to the Colorado Rules of Professional Conduct, “A lawyer shall act with *reasonable* diligence and promptness in representing a client.”² Our professional rules also specify that “competent representation requires the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness, and preparation *reasonably* necessary for the representation.”³ The importance of upholding the integrity of our profession and abiding by our professional rules of conduct is indisputable. However, in my experience as a practicing attorney, as well as coaching attorneys in myriad fields of law, many, if not most of us, seemingly replace the word “reasonable”

with “perfect” in our internalization of the professional rules.

Although well-intended, our proclivity to continually raise the bar (*pun intended!*) on our own performance expectations does not tend to serve us as individuals or as a profession. As I often share with my coaching clients, chasing perfection is tantamount to chasing the horizon; we will never arrive, yet we will exhaust ourselves trying. In the end, we wear ourselves down through our continuous efforts in searching for the next level of “enoughness.” Unfortunately, this does not necessarily result in better outcomes.

Understanding Our Negativity Bias

In many ways, this tendency makes sense. Due to the development of a negativity bias,⁴ humans automatically store and retrieve information

that we interpret as a threat, whether physical, emotional, or psychological. This often results in beneficial outcomes, such as avoiding a car accident on an icy mountain road. In dangerous situations like that, we do not want to pause and debate whether to come to safety. Rather, we rely on our reflexive ability to protect ourselves and others.

This often-useful stress response can be less desirable in other circumstances. An icy road is a clear threat to which we want to respond reflexively. Similarly, if a bear is outside our family’s camping tent, we tend to appreciate our ability to react quickly with a hyperfocus on protecting our loved ones. However, we often experience similar reactivity when we perceive a threat to our reputation, sense of self, career, and similar constructs that we identify (whether consciously or not) as corresponding with our emotional/psychological survival.

For example, many of us receive complimentary feedback from clients, coworkers, supervisors, and loved ones more frequently than we receive critical or constructive feedback. Yet often the feedback we remember and focus on tends to be that which we identify as negative. This is not usually a conscious act of self-flagellation. Rather, a negativity bias automatically identifies information and experiences associated with the negative feedback as a threat and something to avoid or protect against, just like an icy road or a bear seeking the comfort of our family’s tent.

Training Our “Goodness” Muscles

Endeavoring to turn off or disconnect from our negativity bias and the reflexive responses stemming therefrom is unlikely to be fruitful. We can, however, build awareness of when our negativity bias is impacting the lens through which we are experiencing the world. And, once something comes into our awareness, we can do something about it.⁵ As attorneys, we continuously train our analytical, issue-spotting muscles. Layered onto that, our clients often further reinforce our negativity biases by expecting perfection from us. Along the way, we become disproportionately adept at identifying and trying to avoid worst-case outcomes. In effect, we spend countless hours (often calculated in

six-minute increments) further training our Olympian-strength negativity biases. While this can certainly build legal prowess, it can also result in a comparatively underdeveloped sense of goodness, acceptance, compassion, and equanimity.


When I ask my coaching clients to commit to a practice of training the muscles that help store and retrieve information they identify as good or even neutral, I often encounter various forms of resistance. Believing in the possibility of goodness can feel misguided and naive. Acceptance often feels like weakness or giving up. Compassion is often viewed as vulnerable, “soft,” or “mushy.” And many of my clients are not quite sure what equanimity really means or feels like at all. I often remind myself and my clients that more than one thing can be true at the same time. Applied in this context, we can be disappointed in ourselves for overlooking a typo, losing our patience, or even forgetting a filing date while accepting the common humanity of underperforming our own sometimes unrealistic expectations. We can also disagree with something or dislike a situation while still accepting the aspects we are unable to change. Similarly, we can be a work in progress and a masterpiece, all at the same time.⁶

When Enough Is Enough

Joseph Campbell is credited with the expression that “[t]he very cave you are afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you are looking for.”⁷ In our pursuits of perfection, many of us are seeking the security of measuring up to external and internal standards and expectations in the various domains of our lives. Our drive to arrive at the ephemeral, potentially mythical state of perfection is often fueled by a fear of failure. As social animals, humans are motivated to be accepted by others in each realm of our lives. Our need for belonging is an intelligent response to living in professional and personal environments where our ability to thrive (and at times, even survive) is enhanced by approval from others. But what if “enoughness” actually emanates from within ourselves rather than the ever-changing, diverse, and subjective views and biases of others? What if accepting

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ourselves, rather than berating ourselves with performance expectations, is the true treasure map to being enough?

I realize that leaving perfection behind can seem scary, foolish, and even triggering to some of us. If we can remember that more than one thing can be true at the same time, we can remain aware of our desire for perfection while also opening our hearts and minds to the possibility that a path of greater compassion toward ourselves may not actually be a threat to our ability to thrive and survive, but could be the very thing that helps us recognize and trust the “enoughness” we are searching for from others. By building our capacity for and skillfulness in self-compassion, we are unlikely to diminish the heavyweight status of our negativity biases.⁸ However, we can build the skills necessary to recognize and accept that, even for lawyers, the human journey is not a perfect journey. From there, we can learn to trust that the path to unearthing the shiny jewel of “enoughness” is actually within ourselves buried beneath our fears of failure. 



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NOTES

1. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Beacon Press 2006).
2. Colo. RPC 1.3 (emphasis added).
3. Colo. RPC 1.1. (emphasis added).
4. Vaish et al., “Not All Emotions Are Created Equal: The Negativity Bias in Social-Emotional Development,” *Psychol. Bull.* 383 (May 2008).
5. Campbell (writer), “Psyche and Symbol: The Psychological Impulse for and Response to Myth” (television episode), in *Mythos I: The Shaping of Our Mythic Tradition* (PBS 1999).
6. The quote “You are allowed to be both a masterpiece and a work in progress, simultaneously” is frequently attributed to American actress and activist Sophia Bush.
7. Osbon, ed., *Reflections on the Art of Living: A Joseph Campbell Companion* 8, 24 (HarperCollins 1991).
8. See <https://self-compassion.org/what-is-self-compassion> for resources by Kristen Neff on the elements of self-compassion and common self-compassion myths.

For more well-being related strategies, visit the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) website at www.coloradolap.org. Or contact COLAP at info@coloradolap.org or (303) 986-3345 to request a free, confidential well-being consultation.